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ABSTRACT

"Twelve Years a Slave" is a script intended to go with accompanying audio cassettes. It was developed for Voices of Liberty (a project of New Faces of Liberty) and was produced by the San Francisco Study Center as one of their "Cutting Edge Curriculum Materials." The story told by the script is excerpted from the 1989 edition (by Louisiana State University Press) of "Twelve Years a Slave", edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon, which was based on the original 1853 edition. Northup was a free black man in New York who was kidnapped to Washington D.C. and sold into slavery in 1841. The account is a valuable addition to the literature of slave narratives, written from the perspective of one who was both critic and chattel. On his eventual return to New York and freedom, an account of his 12 years as a slave in Louisiana was published. The title page and etchings are replicas of the originals. The text is largely original with the exception of portions identified as "narrator," which were written for this abridged version. (SLD)

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TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE



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TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE

Excerpts from the narrative
of Solomon Northup

Edited by Alice Lucas

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Twelve Years a Slave was developed for Voices of Liberty, a project of New Faces of Liberty, Paula Gillett, director.

For *Twelve Years a Slave* — this script and the accompanying audio cassettes — and other Cutting Edge Curriculum Materials:

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TWELVE YEARS A SLAVE.

NARRATIVE
OF
SOLOMON NORTHUP,
A CITIZEN OF NEW-YORK,
KIDNAPPED IN WASHINGTON CITY IN 1841,
AND
RESCUED IN 1853,
FROM A COTTON PLANTATION NEAR THE RED RIVER,
IN LOUISIANA.

AUBURN:
DERBY AND MILLER.
BUFFALO:
DERBY, ORTON AND MULLIGAN.
CINCINNATI:
HENRY W. DERBY.

1853.

Title page of the original edition



Solomon in his plantation suit

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STORY BEHIND THE STORY

The story on these pages and on the accompanying audio cassettes is excerpted from the 1989 edition of Solomon Northup's narrative, *Twelve Years a Slave*, edited by Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon. In their extensively footnoted text, Eakin and Logsdon verified the accuracy of Northup's story. It is used with the permission of their publisher, the Louisiana State University Press.

Northup's account of life on the frontier plantations of the Gulf states area is a valuable addition to the literature of slave narratives. "He shared the experiences of Southern slaves both as an outside critic and as a fellow Negro chattel. No other commentator on American Slavery has those credentials," Eakin and Logsdon note.

Solomon got the name Northup from his father who had kept the name of his former master, as was the custom for slaves. Upon Solomon's return to Glens Falls, New York, after serving as a slave in Louisiana, it was Attorney Henry B. Northup, the son of Solomon's father's former master, who pursued the legal case against Solomon's kidnappers and the owners of the slave pens where he had been held.

Under the laws of New York state which protected its citizens, the case was heard by the state Supreme Court. But, caught up in jurisdictional entanglements, his kidnappers were never brought to justice.

Upon his return to New York, Solomon Northup took up his trade as a carpenter. No details of his life from then on are known and there are no records of where or when he died or where he is buried.

The title page and etchings reprinted here are from the original text published in 1853. All of the words, with the exception of those identified as *Narrator*, are from the original text.

I

Born Free
in the North

NARRATOR

Readings from the biography Twelve Years a Slave, the true narrative of Solomon Northup, a free black man who lived and worked as a respected citizen of the state of New York. In 1841, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery.

Even though he became the physical property of another man, Solomon Northup refused to allow the enslavement of his mind. On his return to New York in 1853, David Wilson, a lawyer in Glens Falls, New York, published a biographic account of the twelve years of Northup's life as a slave in the bayous of Louisiana.

When Frederick Douglas, an escaped slave who had earlier published his own personal story, read Twelve Years a Slave, he recognized a tragedy beyond his own:

"Think of it!" he wrote. "For thirty years a man, with all a man's hopes and fears and aspirations — with a wife and children to call him by the endearing names of husband and father — with a home, humble it may be, but still a home . . . then for twelve years a thing, a chattel personal, classed with mules and horses."

Wendell Brooks, singer, actor and teacher, reads selections from Northup's narrative. He also sings the spirituals and work songs heard here.

NORTHUP

My father, though born a slave, and laboring under the disadvantages which my unfortunate race is subjected, was a man respected for his industry and integrity, as many now living are ready to testify. His whole life was passed in the peaceful pursuits of agriculture, never seeking employment in those more menial positions, which seem to be especially allotted to the children of Africa. Besides giving us an education surpassing that ordinarily bestowed upon children of our condition, he acquired, by his diligence and economy, a sufficient property to entitle him to the right of suffrage. He was accustomed to speak to us of his early life; and although at all times cherishing the warmest emotions of kindness, and even of affection towards the family in whose house he had been a bondsman, he nevertheless comprehended the system of Slavery, and dwelt with sorrow on the degradation of his race.

On Christmas Day, 1829, I was married to Anne Hampton, a "colored" girl then living in the vicinity of our residence. Up to this period I have been principally engaged with my father in the labors of the farm. The leisure hours allowed me were generally either employed over my books or playing on the violin — an amusement which was the ruling passion of my youth. It has been the source of consolation since, affording pleasure to the simple beings with whom my lot was (later) cast and beguiling my own thoughts for many hours from the painful contemplation of my fate.

I had just now passed the period of my minority, having reached the age of twenty-one years in the month of July previous and with my wife dependent on me for support, I resolved to enter upon a life of industry; and not withstanding the obstacle of color and the consciousness of my lowly state, indulged in pleasant dreams of a good time coming.

During the winter I was employed with others repairing the Champlain Canal. By the time the canal opened in the spring, I was enabled from the savings of my wages to purchase a pair of horses and other things necessarily required in the business of navigation. Having hired several efficient hands to assist me, I entered into contracts for the transportation of large rafts of timber from Lake Champlain to Troy, New York. During the season, I became perfectly familiar with the art and mysteries of rafting — a knowledge which afterwards enabled me to render profitable service to a worthy master and to astonish the simple-witted lumbermen on the banks of the Bayou Boeuf.

Wherever the young people assembled to dance, I was almost invariably there. Throughout the surrounding villages my fiddle was notorious. Anne had become somewhat famous as a cook . . . so that with fiddling, cooking and farming we soon found our selves in the possession of abundance and in fact leading a happy and prosperous life.

I frequently met with slaves, who had accompanied their masters from the South. They were always well dressed and well provided for, leading apparently an easy life, with but few of its ordinary troubles to perplex them. Many times they entered into conversation with me on the subject of Slavery. Almost uniformly I found they cherished a secret desire for liberty. Some of them expressed the most ardent anxiety to escape, and consulted me on the best method of effecting it. The fear of punishment, however, which they knew was certain to attend their re-capture and return, in all cases proved sufficient to deter them from the experiment.

Having all my life breathed the free air of the North, and conscious that I possessed the same feelings and affections that find a place in the white man's breast, conscious, moreover, of an intelligence equal to that of some men with a fairer skin, I was too ignorant, perhaps

too independent, to conceive how any one could be content to live in the abject condition of a slave. I could not comprehend the justice of that law, or that religion, which upholds or recognizes the principle of Slavery; and never once, I am proud to say, did I fail to counsel any one who came to me, to watch his opportunity, and strike for freedom.

At this time we were the parents of three children. They filled our house with gladness. Their young voices were music in our ears. When not at labor I was always walking with them, clad in their best attire, through the streets and groves of Saratoga. Their presence was my delight; and I clasped them to my bosom with as warm and tender love as if their clouded skins had been as white as snow.

Thus far the history of my life presents nothing whatever unusual — nothing but the common hopes, and loves, and labors of an obscure colored man, making his humble progress in the world. But now I had reached a turning point in my existence — reached the threshold of unutterable wrong, and sorrow, and despair.

One morning toward the latter part of the month of March, I met two gentlemen of respectable appearance. I was introduced to them with the remark that I was an expert player on the violin.

They were connected, as they informed me, with a circus company then in the city of Washington and were on their way to rejoin it and were paying for their expenses by an occasional exhibition but had difficulty procuring music for their entertainments. They remarked that if I would accompany them as far as New York, they would give me a dollar for each day's services and three dollars in addition for every night I played at their performances.

I at once accepted the tempting offer. Thinking my absence would be brief, and knowing Anne was away, I did not deem it necessary to notify her where I had gone. So taking a change of linen and my violin, I was ready to depart.

In due course of time we reached New York. I supposed my

journey was at an end, and expected in a day or two to return to my friends and family at Saratoga. However, (my companions) began to importune me to continue with them to Washington. They alleged that immediately on arrival, now that summer was approaching, the circus would set out for the North. They promised me a situation and high wages and I finally concluded to accept the offer.

The next morning they suggested that in as much as we were about entering a slave state, it would be well, before leaving New York, to procure free papers. I thought at the time, I must confess, that the papers were scarcely worth the cost of obtaining them — the apprehension of danger to my personal safety never suggested itself to me in the remotest manner.

With the evidence of freedom in my possession, the next day after our arrival in New York, we proceeded to Washington, at which place we arrived just at nightfall. The next day we went to the Capitol and walked about the grounds. In the afternoon, they strolled towards the President's house, all the time keeping me near to them and pointing out various places of interest. My friends, several times during the afternoon, entered drinking saloons, and called for liquor. They were by no means in the habit, however, as far as I knew them, of indulging to excess. On these occasions, after serving themselves, they would pour out a glass and hand it to me. I did not become intoxicated, as may be inferred from what subsequently occurred. Towards evening, and soon after partaking of one of these potations, I began to experience most unpleasant sensations.

The pain in my head became almost unbearable. In a short time I became insensible. How long I remained in that condition — whether only that night, or many days and nights — I do not know; but when consciousness returned, I found myself alone, in utter darkness, and in chains.

I was very faint and weak. I was sitting upon a low bench, made

of rough boards, and without coat or hat. I was hand-cuffed. Around my ankles were also a pair of heavy fetters. One end of a chain was fastened to a large ring in the floor, the other to the fetters on my ankles. I tried in vain to stand upon my feet. Waking from such a painful trance, it was some time before I could collect my thoughts. Where was I? What was the meaning of these chains? Where were my companions? What had I done to deserve imprisonment in such a dungeon? I could not comprehend. I felt of my pockets as far as my fetters would allow — far enough indeed, to ascertain that I had not only been robbed of liberty, but that my money and free papers were also gone! Then the idea began to break on my mind that I had been kidnapped! It was a desolate thought indeed, and commending myself to the God of the oppressed, bowed my head upon my fettered hands, and wept most bitterly.

At length I heard the crowing of the cock and I knew it was day. My prison fronted on one of the public streets of Washington. Its outside presented only the appearance of a quiet private residence. A stranger looking at it, would never have dreamed of its execrable uses. Strange as it may seem, within plain sight of this same house, looking down from its commanding height upon it, was the Capitol. The voices of patriotic representatives boasting of freedom and equality, and the rattling of the poor slave's chains, almost commingled. A slave pen within the very shadow of the Capitol!

Finally, I heard footsteps. A key rattled in the lock and two men stood before me, James Burch, a well known slave dealer in Washington, and his assistant, a man named Radburn.

"Well, my boy, how do you feel now?" said Burch, as he entered through the open door. I replied that I was sick, and inquired the cause of my imprisonment. He answered that I was his slave and that he had bought me, and that he was about to send me to New Orleans. I asserted, aloud and boldly, that I was a free man, a resident



Scene in the slave pen at Washington

of Saratoga, where I had a wife and children, who were also free, and that my name was Northup. I complained bitterly of the strange treatment I had received, and threatened, upon my liberation, to have satisfaction for the wrong. He denied that I was free, and with an emphatic oath, declared that I came from Georgia. Again and again I asserted that I was no man's slave, and insisted upon his taking off my chains at once. He endeavored to hush me, as if he feared my voice would be overheard.

Turning to Radburn, Burch ordered the paddle and cat-o'-ninetails to be brought in. As soon as these formidable whips appeared, I was seized by both of them, and roughly divested of my clothing. My feet were fastened to the floor. Drawing me over the bench, face downwards, Radburn placed his heavy foot upon the fetters, between my wrists, holding them painfully to the floor. With the paddle, Burch commenced beating me. Blow after blow was inflicted upon my naked body. When his unrelenting arm grew tired, he stopped and asked if I still insisted I was a free man. I did insist upon it, and then the blows were renewed, faster and more energetically, if possible, than before. When again tired, he would repeat the same question, and receiving the same answer, continued his cruel labor.

At length the paddle broke. Casting madly on the floor the handle of the broken paddle, he seized the rope. This was far more painful than the other. I struggled with all my power, but it was in vain. I prayed for mercy, but my prayer was only answered with imprecations and with stripes.

At last I became silent to his repeated questions. I would make no reply. In fact, I was becoming almost unable to speak. Still he plied the lash without stint upon my poor body, until it seemed that the lacerated flesh was stripped from my bones at every stroke. At length Radburn said that it was useless to whip me any more that I would be sore enough. Thereupon, Burch desisted, saying, with an admonitory

shake of his fist in my face, and hissing the words through his firm-set teeth, that if ever I dared to utter again that I was entitled to my freedom, that I had been kidnapped, or any thing whatever of the kind, the castigation that I had just received was nothing in comparison to what would follow and going out, locking the great door behind them, I was left in darkness as before.

In an hour, perhaps two, my heart leaped to my throat, as the key rattled in the door again. I who had been so lonely and who had longed so ardently to see some one, now shuddered at the thought of man's approach. Radburn entered, bringing with him on a tin plate, a piece of shriveled fried pork, a slice of bread and a cup of water. He unlocked the fetters from my ankles, opened the shutters of the little window and departed, leaving me again alone. By this time, I had become stiff and sore, my body was covered with blisters and it was with great pain and difficulty that I could move. Still, my spirit was not broken. I indulged the anticipation of escape. It was impossible, I reasoned, that men should be so unjust as to detain me as a slave. Surely, my former traveling companions would seek me out and deliver me from imprisonment. Alas! I had not then learned the measure of "man's inhumanity to man," nor to what limitless extent of wickedness he will go for the love of gain.

In the course of several days the outer door was thrown open, allowing me the liberty of the yard. There I found three slaves; Randall, a lad of ten years, the others young men of about twenty and twenty-five. I was not long in forming an acquaintance, and learning their names and the particulars of their history.

I remained in Williams' slave pen about two weeks. The night previous to my departure a woman was brought in, weeping bitterly, and leading by the hand a little child. They were Randall's mother and half-sister. On meeting them he was overjoyed, clinging to her dress, kissing the child, and exhibiting every demonstration of delight.

Her name was Eliza, and this was the story of her life. She was the slave of a rich man, living in the neighborhood of Washington. He brought Eliza into a house he built after quarreling with his wife; and, on condition of her living with him, she and her children were to be emancipated. She resided with him for nine years, with servants to attend upon her, and provided with every luxury and comfort of life. Emily was his child. Finally, she and her children fell to the share of a relative of her owner who took her to Washington on the pretense that the time had come to execute her free papers. The hope of years was blasted in a few moments when she was bought by Burch.

At intervals during the first night of Eliza's incarceration in the pen, she commenced weeping, kissing the sleeping children, talking first to one, then to the other, as they lay in their unconscious slumbers, with their heads upon her lap. About midnight following, the cell door opened, and Burch and Radburn entered, with lanterns in their hands. Burch, with an oath, ordered us to roll up our blankets without delay, and get ready to go.

NARRATOR

Northrup and the others left the capital city of Washington aboard a steamboat headed down the Potomac River to Richmond, Virginia. After an overnight rest there, Burch bought another lot of slaves and loaded them all on the brig ORLEANS, bound for Norfolk farther down Chesapeake Bay. Here Burch made his final purchase of men, women and children whom he hoped to sell for a profit. The next day, he returned to Washington, consigning his entire pen of fifty slaves to be sold when the ship arrived in the southern port of New Orleans.

NORTHUP

Very soon after the brig arrived in New Orleans, traders and consignees came on board. One, a tall, thin-faced man made his appearance, with a paper in his hand. Burch's gang was consigned to him. This gentleman was Mr. Theophilus Freeman. Reading from his paper, he called, "Platt." No one answered. The name was called again and again, but still there was no reply. Then Lethe was called, then Eliza, then Harry, until the list was finished, each one stepping forward as his or her name was called.

"Captain, where's Platt?" demanded Theophilus Freeman. The captain was unable to inform him, no one being on board answering to that name.

"Who shipped *that nigger*?" he again inquired of the captain, pointing to me. "Burch," replied the captain.

"Your name is *Platt* — you answer my description. Why don't you come forward?" he demanded of me, in an angry tone. I informed him that was not my name; that I had never been called by it, but that I had no objection to it as I knew of. "Well, I will *learn* you your name," said he; "and so you won't forget it either."

Next day many customers called to examine Freeman's "new lot." He would make us hold up our heads, walk briskly back and forth, while customers would feel of our hands and arms and bodies, turn us about, ask us what we could do, make us open our mouths and show our teeth, precisely as a jockey examines a horse which he is about to barter for or purchase. Sometimes a man or woman was taken back to the small house in the yard, stripped, and inspected more minutely. Scars upon a slave's back were considered evidence of a rebellious or unruly spirit, and hurt his sale.

One man purchased Randall. The little fellow was made to jump, and run across the floor, and perform many other feats, exhib-

iting his activity and condition. All the time the trade was going on, Eliza was crying aloud, and wringing her hands. She besought the man not to buy him, unless he also bought herself and Emily. She promised, in that case, to be the most faithful slave that ever lived. The man answered that he could not afford it, and then Eliza burst into a paroxysm of grief, weeping plaintively. Freeman turned round to her, savagely, with his whip in his uplifted hand, ordering her to stop her noise, or he would give her a hundred lashes. Eliza shrunk before him, and tried to wipe away her tears, but it was all in vain. The bargain was agreed upon, and Randall must go alone. Then Eliza ran to him; embraced him passionately; kissed him again and again; told him to remember her — all the while her tears falling in the boy's face like rain. "Don't cry, mama. I will be a good boy. Don't cry," said Randall, looking back, as they passed out of the door.

II

A Slave in the South

NORTHUP

At length, one day, while we were in the yard, Freeman came out and ordered us to our places, in the great room. A gentleman was waiting for us as we entered. He offered Freeman one thousand dollars for me, nine hundred for Harry, and seven hundred for Eliza.

As soon as Eliza heard it, she was in agony again. She broke from her place in the line of women, and rushing down where Emily was standing, caught her in her arms. The child, sensible of some impending danger, instinctively fastened her hands around her mother's neck and nestled her little head upon her bosom. Freeman sternly ordered her to be quiet. He caught her by the arm and pulled her rudely, but she only clung closer to the child. "Mercy, mercy, master!" she cried, falling on her knees. "Please, master, buy Emily too. I can never work any if she is taken from me; I will die." Finally, the purchaser of Eliza stepped forward, evidently affected, and said to Freeman he would buy Emily, and asked what her price was. "What is her price? Buy her? I won't sell her. She's not for sale." There were heaps and piles of money to be made of her, he said, when she was a few years older. There were men enough in New Orleans who would give five thousand dollars for such an extra, handsome, fancy piece as Emily would be. She was a beauty, a picture, a doll, one of the regular bloods — none of your thick-lipped, bullet-headed, cotton-picking niggers.

When Eliza heard Freeman's determination not to part with Emily, she became absolutely frantic. "I *will* not go without her. They *shall* not take her from me," she fairly shrieked, her shrieks commingling with the loud and angry voice of Freeman, commanding her to be silent.

Finally, Freeman, out of patience, tore Emily from her mother by main force, the two clinging to each other with all their might. "Don't leave me, mama—don't leave me," screamed the child, as its



Scene of Eliza and her last child

mother was pushed harshly forward. "Don't leave me. Come back, mama," she still cried, stretching forth her little arms imploringly. She cried in vain. Out of the door and into the street we were quickly hurried. Still we could hear her calling to her mother, "Come back. Don't leave me. Come back, mama," until her infant voice grew faint and still more faint, and gradually died away.

Our new master was counted by his fellow-citizens as a worthy minister of God. In many northern minds, perhaps, the idea of a man holding his brother man in servitude, and the traffic in human flesh, may seem altogether incompatible with their conceptions of a moral or religious life. From descriptions of such men as Burch and Freeman, and others hereinafter mentioned, they are led to despise and execrate the whole class of slaveholders indiscriminately. But I was some time his slave, and had an opportunity of learning well his character and disposition, and it is but simple justice to him when I say, in my opinion, there was never a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford. The influences and associations that had always surrounded him, blinded him to the inherent wrong at the bottom of the system of Slavery. He never doubted the moral right of one man holding another in subjection. Looking through the same medium with his fathers before him, he saw things in the same light. Brought up under other circumstances and other influences, his notions would undoubtedly have been different. Nevertheless, he was a model master, walking uprightly according to the light of his understanding, and fortunate was the slave who came to his possession. Were all men such as he, Slavery would be deprived of more than half its bitterness.

He, however, lost nothing by his kindness. It is a fact I have more than once observed, that those who treated their slaves most leniently, were rewarded by the greatest amount of labor. I know it from my own experience. It was a source of pleasure to surprise Master

Ford with a greater day's work than was required, while, under subsequent masters, there was no prompter to extra effort but the overseer's lash.

It was the desire of Ford's approving voice that suggested to me an idea that resulted to his profit. The lumber we were manufacturing was contracted to be taken by land for sale in Lamourie, and transportation was an important item of expense. Indian Creek, upon which the mills were situated, was a narrow but deep stream emptying into Bayou Boeuf. Provided the creek could be made navigable it occurred to me that the expense of transportation would be materially diminished by the use of rafts. Ford, when I laid the idea before him, received it favorably, and permitted me to try the experiment.

Having removed the obstructions, I made a narrow raft. At this business I think I was quite skillful, not having forgotten my experience years before on the Champlain canal. I labored hard, being extremely anxious to succeed from a desire to please my master. The arrival of the raft at Lamourie created a sensation, while Mr. Ford loaded me with commendations. On all sides I heard Ford's Platt pronounced the "smartest nigger in Pine Woods."

William Ford unfortunately became embarrassed in his pecuniary affairs. It was therefore necessary, in order to meet these demands, to dispose of eighteen slaves, myself among the number. I was sold to Tibeats, in consequence, undoubtedly, of my slight skill as a carpenter. At the time of my sale to Tibeats, the price agreed to be given for me being more than the debt, Ford took a chattel mortgage of four hundred dollars. I am indebted for my life, as will hereafter be seen, to that mortgage.

John M. Tibeats was the opposite of Ford in all respects. He was a small, crabbed, quick-tempered, spiteful man. He had no fixed residence that I ever heard of, but passed from one plantation to another, wherever he could find employment. He was without standing

in the community, not esteemed by white men, nor even respected by slaves. He was ignorant, withal, and of a revengeful disposition. Certain it is, it was a most unlucky day for me that brought us together.

One night, having worked until it was too dark to see, I was ordered by Tibeats to rise very early in the morning, procure a keg of nails from (the overseer) Chapin, and commence putting on clapboards. Before daylight I was on the piazza of the "great house," awaiting the appearance of the overseer.

As the day began to open, Tibeats came out of the house to where I was hard at work. He seemed to be that morning even more morose and disagreeable than usual. He was my master, entitled by law to my flesh and blood, and to exercise over me such tyrannical control as his mean nature prompted; but there was no law that could prevent my looking upon him with intense contempt. I despised both his disposition and his intellect.

"I thought I told you to commence putting on weather boards this morning," he remarked.

"Yes, master, and I am about it," I replied.

"Where?" he demanded.

"On the other side," was my answer. He walked round to the other side, examined my work for a while, muttering to himself in a fault-finding tone. Then, coming towards me in a great passion, he exclaimed, "God damn you! I thought you *known* something."

"I tried to do as you told me, master. I didn't mean anything wrong." But he interrupted me with such a flood of curses that I was unable to finish the sentence. At length he ran toward the house and, took down one of the overseer's whips.

At first I was somewhat frightened, and my impulse was to run. I knew he intended to whip me, and it was the first time any one had attempted it since my arrival. I felt, moreover, that I had been faithful — that I was guilty of no wrong whatever, and deserved commendation

rather than punishment. My fear changed to anger, and before he reached me I had made up my mind fully not to be whipped, let the result be life or death.

Winding the lash around his hand, and taking hold of the small end of the stock, he walked up to me, and with a malignant look, ordered me to strip.

"Master Tibeats," said I, looking him boldly in the face, "I will *not*." I was about to say something further in justification, but with a concentrated vengeance, he sprang upon me, seizing me by the throat with one hand, raising the whip with the other, in the act of striking. Before the blow descended, however, I had caught him by the collar of the coat, and drawn him closely to me. Reaching down, I seized him by the ankle, and pushing him back with the other hand, he fell over on the ground. Putting one arm around his leg, and holding it to my breast, so that his head and shoulders only touched the ground, I placed my foot upon his neck. He was completely in my power. My blood was up. It seemed to course through my veins like fire. In the frenzy of my madness, I snatched the whip from his hand. He struggled with all his power, swore that I should not live to see another day, and that he would tear out my heart. But his struggles and his threats were alike in vain. I cannot tell how many times I struck him. Blow after blow fell fast and heavy upon his wriggling form. At length he screamed — cried murder — and called on God for mercy. But he who had never shown mercy did not receive it. The stiff stock of the whip warped round his cringing body until my right arm ached. I struck him a blow or two more, then pushed him from me with such a well-directed kick that he went rolling over on the ground. Chapin the overseer, was coming as fast as he could ride.

Rising to his feet, and brushing the dirt from his hair, Tibeats stood looking at me, pale with rage. We gazed at each other in silence. Not a word was uttered until Chapin galloped up to us.

"What is the matter?" he cried out. "Master Tibeats wants to whip me for using the nails you gave me," I replied.

"I am overseer here," Chapin began. "I hope you will understand that, Mr. Tibeats."

Tibeats made no reply, but, grinding his teeth and shaking his fist, he saddled his horse, the only property he possessed besides myself, departed on the road to Cheneyville. When he was gone, Chapin visibly excited told me not to stir, not to attempt to leave the plantation on any account whatever. I remained where I was, doubting whether it was better to fly or abide the result, whatever it might be.

As I stood there, feelings of unutterable agony overwhelmed me. I was conscious that I had subjected myself to unimaginable punishment. An unfriended, helpless slave what could I do, what could I say, to justify, in the remotest manner, the heinous act I had committed, of resenting a white man's abuse. I could only bow my head upon my hands and weep. For at least an hour I remained in this situation, when, looking up, I beheld Tibeats, accompanied by two horsemen, coming down the bayou. They rode into the yard, jumped from their horses, and approached me with large whips, one of them also carrying a coil of rope.

"Now, then," inquired one of Tibeats' companions, "where shall we hang the nigger?" One proposed such a limb, extending from the body of a peach tree, near the spot where we were standing. His comrade objected to it, alleging it would break, and proposed another. Finally they fixed upon the latter.

At length, as they were dragging me towards the tree, Chapin came out of the house and walked towards us. He had a pistol in each hand, and as near as I can now recall to mind, spoke in a firm, determined manner, as follows:

"Gentlemen, whoever moves that slave another foot from where he stands is a dead man. In the first place, he *does* not deserve this



Chapin rescues Solomon from hanging

treatment. You, Tibeats, are in the fault yourself. You richly deserve the flogging you have received. In the next place, I have been overseer of this plantation seven years, and, in the absence of William Ford, am master here. My duty is to protect his interests. Ford holds a mortgage on Platt of four hundred dollars. If you hang him, he loses his debt. Until that is canceled you have no right to take his life. You have no right to take it any way. There is a law for the slave as well as for the white man. You are no better than a murderer."

NARRATOR

Tibeats and his friends were chased off by Chapin and Platt was left standing all day in the middle of the yard, under the white-hot midday sun, awaiting the arrival of Master Ford. His hands and feet were bound and he was given no food or water. William Ford did not arrive until late in the day. He ordered Platt to be freed of his bonds and brought him into the big house where he could sleep on the floor safe from the smoldering hatred of Tibeats. A short time later, Platt was sold again, this time as a field worker on the large plantation of Edwin Epps.

NORTHUP

Work on large plantations such as Master Epps' is a year-round cycle of planting, hoeing, picking and cutting. The hands are required to be in the cotton fields as soon as it is light in the morning, and, with the exception of ten or fifteen minutes, which is given them at noon to swallow their allowance of cold bacon, they are not permitted to be a moment idle until it is too dark to see, and when the moon is full, they often times labor till the middle of the night.

On larger estates, an overseer follows the slaves into the fields on horseback, armed with pistols, bowie knife, whip, and accompa-

nied by several dogs. It is his business to produce large crops, and that is accomplished no matter what amount of suffering it may cost. Besides the overseer, there are black drivers under him who, in addition to the performance of their equal share of work, are compelled to do the whipping of their several gangs or they are whipped themselves. During hoeing time, the faster hoer takes the lead row. If another one passes him, he is whipped. If one falls behind or is a moment idle, he is whipped. In fact the lash is flying from morning until night, from April 'til July.

In the latter part of August begins the cotton picking season. At this time each slave is presented with a sack with a strap fastened to it, which goes over the neck while the bottom reaches nearly to the ground. Each one is also presented with a large basket that will hold about two barrels. This is to put the cotton in when the sack is filled. The baskets are carried to the field and placed at the beginning of the rows.

When a new hand is sent for the first time into the field, he is whipped up smartly, and made for that day to pick as fast as he possibly can. At night it is weighed, so that his capability in cotton picking is known. He must bring in the same weight each night following. If it falls short, it is considered evidence that he has been laggard, and a greater or less number of lashes is the penalty.

The day's work over in the field, the baskets are "toted" to the gin-house, where the cotton is weighed. A slave never approaches the gin-house with his basket of cotton but with fear. If it falls short in weight, he knows that he must suffer. And if he has exceeded it by ten or twenty pounds, in all probability his master will measure the next day's task accordingly. Most frequently they have too little, and therefore they are not anxious to leave the field. After weighing, follow the whippings, and then the baskets are carried to the cotton house, and their contents stored away.

This done, the labor of the day is not yet ended, by any means. Each one must then attend to his respective chores. One feeds the mules, another the swine — another cuts the wood, and so forth.

Finally, at a late hour, they reach their quarters, sleepy and overcome with the long day's toil. Then a fire must be kindled in the cabin, the corn ground in the small hand-mill, and supper, and dinner for the next day in the field, prepared. All that is allowed them is corn and bacon — no tea, coffee, sugar, and with the exception of a very scanty sprinkling now and then, no salt.

The majority of slaves have no knife, much less a fork, nor dish, nor kettle, nor any other thing in the shape of crockery. They cut their bacon with the axe at the woodpile and cook it on the coals. Corn is ground, the meal mixed with a little water, placed in the fire, and baked. When it is "done brown", the ashes are scraped off, and being placed upon a chip, which answers for a table, the tenant of the slave hut is ready to sit down upon the ground to supper. By this time it is usually midnight.

The same fear of punishment with which they approach the gin-house, possesses them again on lying down to get a snatch of rest. It is the fear of oversleeping in the morning. Such an offence would certainly be attended with not less than twenty lashes. With a prayer that he may be on his feet and wide awake at the first sound of the horn, he sinks to his slumbers nightly. Such is a true, faithful, unexaggerated picture and description of the slave's daily life.

Had it not been for my beloved violin, I scarcely can conceive how I could have endured the long years of bondage. It heralded my name round the country, made me friends who otherwise would not have noticed me, gave me an honored seat at the yearly feasts and secured the loudest and heartiest welcome of them all at the Christmas dance.

The Christmas dance! Oh, ye pleasure-seeking sons and

daughters of idleness, who move with measured step, listless and snail-like, through the slow winding cotillion, if ye wish to look upon genuine happiness, rampant and unrestrained — go down to Louisiana and see the slaves dancing in the starlight of a Christmas night.

During three days of holiday succeeding Christmas, slaves were different beings from what they are in the field. Given temporary relaxation, the brief deliverance from fear and from the lash produced an entire metamorphosis in their appearance and demeanor.

On that particular Christmas I have now in my mind, Miss Lively and Mr. Sam started the ball in the yard outside the slave quarters. It was well known that Sam cherished an ardent passion for Lively, a heart-breaking coquettish withal. She gave him her hand for the first "figure." Samuel's legs flew like drum-sticks down the outside and up the middle, by the side of his bewitching partner. While the whole company cheered them vociferously, and, excited with the applause, they continued "tearing down" after all the others had become exhausted and halted a moment to recover breath. But Sam's superhuman exertions overcame him finally, leaving Lively alone, yet whirling like a top. Thereupon one of Sam's rivals, Pete Marshall, dashed in, and, with might and main, leaped and shuffled and threw himself into every conceivable shape. Then it was time for Harry Carey to try his hand; but Lively soon out-winded him, amidst hurrahs and shouts, fully sustaining her well-earned reputation of being the "fastest gal" on the bayou.

One "set" off another takes its place, he or she remaining on the floor longest receiving the most uproarious commendation, and so the dancing continues until broad daylight. It does not cease with the sound of the fiddle, but in that case they set up a music peculiar to themselves. This is called "patting," accompanied with one of those unmeaning songs, composed rather for its adaptation to a certain tune or measure, than for the purpose of expressing any distinct idea.

And that is the Christmas dance. My business on these gala days was always to play on the violin. My master often received letters, sometimes from a distance of ten miles, requesting him to send me to play at a holiday ball or festival of the whites. He received his compensation, and usually I also returned with many picayunes jingling in my pockets—the extra contributions of those to whose delight I had administered.

The young men and maidens always knew there was to be a jollification somewhere, whenever Platt Epps was seen passing through the town with his fiddle in his hand. "Where are you going now, Platt?" and "What is coming off tonight, Platt?" would be interrogatories issuing from every door and window, and many a time when there was no special hurry, Platt would draw his bow, and sitting astride his mule, perhaps, discourse musically to a crowd of delighted children, gathered around him in the street.

Christmas! For three days a year: the other three hundred and sixty-two being days of weariness, and fear, and suffering, and unremitting labor.

III

Free at Last

NORTHUP

There was not a day throughout the ten years I belonged to Epps that I did not consult with myself upon the prospect of escape. I laid many plans, which at the time I considered excellent ones, but one after the other they were all abandoned. No man who has never been placed in such a situation, can comprehend the thousand obstacles thrown in the way of the fleeing slave. Every white man's hand is raised against him—the patrollers are watching for him—the hounds are ready to follow on his track, and the nature of the country is such as renders it impossible to pass through it with any safety.

Notwithstanding the certainty of being captured, the woods and swamps are nevertheless, continually filled with runaways. Many of them, when sick, or so worn out as to be unable to perform their tasks, escape into the swamps, willing to suffer the punishment inflicted for such offences, in order to obtain a day or two of rest.

Not infrequently the runaway loses his life in the attempt to escape. During the holidays and occasionally while at work in adjoining fields, I had an opportunity of making the acquaintance of a negro driver named Augustus, which eventually ripened into a warm and mutual attachment. Summer before last he was so unfortunate as to incur the displeasure of the overseer, a coarse, heartless brute, who whipped him most cruelly. Augustus ran away. Reaching a cane rick, he secreted himself in the top of it. All the dogs were put upon his track—some fifteen of them—and soon scented his footsteps to the hiding place. They surrounded the rick, baying and scratching, but could not reach him. Presently, guided by the clamor of the hounds, the pursuers rode up, and the overseer, mounting on the rick, drew him forth. As he rolled to the ground the whole pack plunged upon him, and before they could be beaten off, had gnawed and mutilated his body in the most shocking manner, their teeth having penetrated

to the bone in an hundred places. He was taken up, tied upon a mule and carried home. But this was Augustus' last trouble. He lingered until the next day, when death sought the unhappy boy, and kindly relieved him from his agony.

It was not unusual for slave women as well as slave men to endeavor to escape. The most remarkable instance of a successful evasion of dogs and hunters was Celeste. She was nineteen or twenty, and far whiter than her owner, or any of his offspring. It required a close inspection to distinguish in her features the slightest trace of African blood. A stranger would never have dreamed that she was the descendant of slaves. I was sitting in my cabin at night, playing a low air on my violin, when the door opened carefully, and Celeste stood before me. She was pale and haggard. Had an apparition arisen from the earth, I could not have been more startled.

"Who are you?" I demanded, after gazing at her a moment.

"I'm hungry; give me some bacon," was her reply.

My first impression was that she was some deranged young mistress, who, escaping from home, was wandering, she knew not whither and had been attracted to my cabin by the sound of the violin. The coarse cotton slave dress she wore, however, soon dispelled such a supposition.

"What is your name?" I again interrogated

"My name is Celeste," she answered. "I belong to Carey, and have been two days among the palmettoes. I am sick and can't work, and would rather die in the swamp than be whipped to death by the overseer." For several nights she came to my cabin for food, but it was not deemed prudent for her to come to the yard. The unpleasant howlings of wild animals heard at night along the borders of the swamp so terrified her that she finally concluded to return to her master where she was scourged, her neck meanwhile being fastened in the stocks, and sent into the field again.

The effect of these exhibitions of brutality on the household of the slaveholder, is apparent. Slavery in its most cruel form has a tendency to brutalize the humane and finer feelings of men's nature. Daily witnesses of human suffering — listening to the agonizing screeches of the slave, beholding him writhing beneath the merciless lash — bitten and torn by dogs, dying without attention, and buried without shroud or coffin — it cannot otherwise be expected, than that they should become brutified and reckless of human life. It is not the fault of the slaveholder that he is cruel, so much as it is the fault of the system under which he lives. He cannot withstand the influence of habit and associations that surround him. Taught from earliest childhood, by all that he sees and hears, that the rod is for the slave's back, he will not be apt to change his opinions in maturer years.

Epps' oldest son is an intelligent lad of ten or twelve years of age. It is pitiable, sometimes to see him chastising, for instance, the venerable Uncle Abram. He will call the old man to account, and if in his childish judgment it is necessary, sentence him to a certain number of lashes, which he proceeds to inflict with much gravity and deliberation. Mounted on his pony, he often rides into the field with his whip, playing the overseer, greatly to his father's delight. Without discrimination, at such times, he applies the rawhide, urging the slaves forward with shouts, and occasional expressions of profanity, while the old man laughs, and commends him as a thorough-going boy.

Young Master Epps looked upon the black man simply as an animal, differing in no respect from any other animal, save in the gift of speech and the possession of somewhat higher instincts, and, therefore, the more valuable. Brought up with such ideas, no wonder the oppressors of my people are a pitiless and unrelenting race.

In the month of June 1852, Edwin Epps commenced the erection of a house and employed the services of Bass, a carpenter who was a native of Canada. One day while working on the new house, Bass

and Epps became engaged in a controversy to which, as will be readily supposed, I listened with absorbing interest. They were discussing the subject of Slavery.

"I'll tell you what it is Epps. It's all wrong — all wrong, sir — There's no justice or righteousness in it. I wouldn't own a slave. What right have you to your niggers when you come right down to it?"

"What right!" said Epps, laughing, "why I bought 'em and paid for 'em!"

"Of course you did; the law says you have the right to hold a nigger, but begging the law's pardon, it *lies*. Suppose they'd pass a law taking away your liberty and making you a slave?"

"Oh, that ain't a supposable case," said Epps, still laughing. "I hope you don't compare me to a nigger, Bass."

"Well," Bass answered gravely, "no, not exactly. But I have seen niggers before now as good as I am. Now, in the sight of God, what is the difference, Epps, between a white man and a black one?"

"All the difference in the world," replied Epps. "You might as well ask what the difference is between a white man and a baboon. Now, I've seen one of them critters in Orleans that knowed just as much as any nigger I've got. You'd call them feller citizens, I s'pose?" And Epps indulged in a loud laugh at his own wit.

"Look here, Epps," continued his companion, "you can't laugh me down that way. Now let me ask you a question. Are all men created free and equal as the Declaration of Independence holds they are?"

"Yes," responded Epps, "but all men, niggers, and monkeys *ain't*;" and hereupon he broke forth into a more boisterous laugh than before.

"There are monkeys among white people as well as black, when you come to that," coolly remarked Bass. "I know some white men that use arguments no sensible monkey would. But let that pass. These niggers are human beings. If they don't know as much as their

masters, whose fault is it? They are not allowed to know anything. You have books and papers, and can go where you please, and gather intelligence in a thousand ways. But your slaves have no privileges. You'd whip one of them if caught reading a book. They are held in bondage, generation after generation, deprived of mental improvement, and who can expect them to possess much knowledge? There's a sin, a fearful sin, resting on this nation, that will not go unpunished forever. There will be a reckoning yet — yes, Epps, there's a day coming that will burn as an oven. It may be sooner or it may be later, but it's a coming as sure as the Lord is just."

Bass remained at Epps' through the summer. The more I saw of him, the more I became convinced he was a man in whom I could confide. In the early part of August he and myself were at work alone in the house, the other carpenters having left, and Epps being absent in the field. Now was the time, if ever, to broach the subject, and I resolved to do it, and submit to whatever consequences might ensue. We were busily at work in the afternoon, when I stopped suddenly and said, "Master Bass, I want to ask you what part of the country you came from?"

"Why, Platt, what put that into your head?" he answered. "You wouldn't know if I should tell you." After a moment or two he added — "I was born in Canada, now guess where that is."

"Oh, I know where Canada is," said I, "I have been there myself."

"Yes, I expect you are well acquainted all through that country," he remarked, laughing incredulously.

"As sure as I live, Master Bass," I replied, "I have been there. I have been in Montreal and Kingston, and Queenston, and a great many places in Canada, and I have been in York State too — in Buffalo, and Rochester, and Albany, and can tell you the names of the villages on the Erie Canal and the Champlain Canal."

Bass turned round and gazed at me a long time without uttering a syllable. "How came you here?" he inquired, at length.

"Master Bass," I answered, "if justice had been done, I never would have been here."

"Sure enough, I know all the places you mention. How did you happen to get here? Come, tell me about it."

"I have no friends here that I can put confidence in," was my reply. "I am afraid to tell you, though I don't believe you would tell Master Epps if I should."

After assurances on his part that I should not be betrayed, I began a relation of the history of my life and misfortunes. He was deeply interested, asking numerous questions in reference to localities and events. Having ended my story I besought him to write some of my friends in the North, acquainting them with my situation, and begging them to forward free papers, or take such steps as they might consider proper to secure my release. He promised to do so. Before we parted our plan of operation was arranged.

He was to write down on paper the names and addresses of several persons, old friends in the North, to whom he would direct letters during his next visit to Marksville. The letters were deposited in the post-office on 15th August, 1852.

In the months that followed, I was in a fever of suspense. The time passed slowly indeed. By Christmas time, I had about given up expectation of receiving any answer to the letters. They might have miscarried, or might have been misdirected. Perhaps those at Saratoga, to whom they had been addressed, were all dead; perhaps, engaged in their pursuits, they did not consider the fate of an obscure, unhappy black man of sufficient importance to be noticed.

Many months later, I learned of the events which took place in New York. The letter written by Bass arrived in Saratoga in September. On receipt of it, Anne read it to the children and without



Scene in the cotton field, Solomon delivered up

delay hastened to the neighboring village of Sandy Hill, to consult Henry B. Northup, (the son of my father's former owner and my faithful friend) and obtain his advice and assistance in the matter.

Upon examination, that gentleman found among the statutes of the State an act providing for the recovery of free citizens from slavery. The Governor of the State is authorized to institute such legal proceedings as may be necessary to return such a person to the State. His excellency took a lively interest in the matter and employed Henry B. Northup, Esq., as agent with full power to effect my restoration. At his own expense, this gentlemen traveled to Bayou Beouf and presented his papers to the sheriff there.

Monday morning, the third of January 1853, we were in the field, our fingers numb in the raw, cold morning. A carriage passed rapidly toward the house. Looking up, we saw two men approaching us through the cotton field. In my long residence in the bayou, I had become familiar with the face of every planter within many miles; but this man was an utter stranger — certainly I had never seen him before.

"Your name is Platt, is it?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, master," I responded.

Pointing towards Northup, standing a few rods distant, he demanded, "Do you know that man?"

I looked in the direction indicated, and as my eyes rested on his countenance, a world of images thronged my brain; a multitude of well-known faces — Anne's and the dear children's, and my old dead father's; all the scenes and associations of my childhood and youth; all the friends of other and happier days, appeared and disappeared, flitting and floating like dissolving shadows before the vision of my imagination, until at last the perfect memory of the man recurred to me, and throwing up my hands towards Heaven, I exclaimed in a voice louder than I could utter in a less exciting moment —

"Henry B. Northup! Thank God — Thank God!"

In an instant I comprehended the nature of his business, and felt that the hour of my deliverance was at hand. I started towards him, but the sheriff stepped before me.

"Stop a moment," he said, "have you any other name than Platt?"

"Solomon Northup is my name, Master," I replied.

He was proceeding to ask further questions, but I pushed past him, unable to restrain myself. I seized my old acquaintance by both hands. I could not speak. I could not refrain from tears.

"Sol," he said at length, "I'm glad to see you."

I essayed to make some answer, but emotion choked all utterance, and I was silent. The slaves, utterly confounded, stood gazing upon the scene, their open mouths and rolling eyes indicating the most wonder and astonishment. For ten years I had dwelt among them, in the field and in the cabin, borne the same hardships, partaken the same fare, mingled my griefs with theirs, participated in the same scanty joys. Nevertheless, not until this hour had they the remotest suspicion of my true name, or the slightest knowledge of my real history.

Not a word was spoken for several minutes, during which time I clung fast to Northup, looking up into his face, fearful I should awake and find it all a dream.

"Throw down that sack," Northup added, finally. "Your days of cotton-picking are over."

In the company of my deliverer, I traveled the long miles back to New York state, arriving there on January 21, 1853.

The following morning I started, in company with several acquaintances, for Glens Falls, the residence of Anne and our children.

As I entered their comfortable cottage, Margaret was the first that met me. She did not recognize me. When I left her, she was but



Arrival home, and the first meeting with his
wife and children

seven years old, a little prattling girl, playing with her toys. Now she was grown to womanhood — was married, with a bright-eyed boy standing by her side. Not forgetful of his enslaved, unfortunate grandfather, she had named the child Solomon Northup Staunton. When told who I was, she was overcome with emotion, and unable to speak. Presently Elizabeth entered the room, and Anne came running from the hotel, having been informed of my arrival. They embraced me, and with tears flowing down their cheeks, hung upon my neck.

My narrative is at an end. What slavery is in the region of Red River, is truly and faithfully delineated in these pages. This is no fiction, no exaggeration. If I have failed in anything, it is in presenting the reader too prominently the bright side of the picture.

Solomon Northup
Glens Falls, New York, 1853

NOTES ON THE TAPES

The music on the accompanying tapes supports Solomon Northup's story. The work songs and spirituals are well-known in African-American culture. In the tradition of the music, however, Wendell Brooks has sometimes created verses to tell the story of the people and situations Northup describes.

In *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 203), Lawrence Levine says black music is a "participant activity. . . that gets across the thought, spirit and history of the very segment of the Negro community that. . . has been rendered inarticulate by neglect."

This is illustrated in the song "Another Man Done Gone," on the *Free at Last* tape, which Mr. Brooks sings after the slave Augustus dies from the wounds inflicted by his master's dogs. Eliza's deep sorrow over the loss of her children is underscored by the song "Motherless Child" on the tape *A Slave in the South*, and on the same tape, anger and frustration after a hard day's work with little to eat are expressed in the work chants.

But even in the midst of all this suffering, Northup was able to bring a measure of joy to his fellow slaves and comfort for himself when he played his violin. For the white folks in the bayou, he played the waltzes and quadrilles popular in the 18th and 19th century.

The vocal and instrumental music on the tapes was chosen for appropriateness and authenticity. It is interwoven with the text to underscore the emotion and content of Solomon Northup's story.

THE PEOPLE BEHIND THIS BOOK

Project editor Alice Lucas, a middle school teacher, is author and editor of three bilingual folktales from Southeast Asia, which she collected on a travel sabbatical. The stories — in print and on tape with accompanying music played on traditional instruments — were produced for the Voices of Liberty project. Her interest in *Twelve Years a Slave*, also developed for Voices of Liberty and also told on tape with traditional music, stems from the belief that primary sources give us deeper understanding of the people and events of the past.



Music consultant and recording engineer Katherine Austin contributed her sensitivity and expertise in the selection of music for *Twelve Years a Slave*. An accomplished pianist who teaches piano and records educational and public service projects, Ms. Austin has a master's degree in electronic music and a strong interest in new musical forms.

Jody Stecher is internationally known for his fiddling, banjo, mandolin and guitar work. He and his wife, Kate Brislin, have recorded several albums of bluegrass and other traditional music, and frequently perform at blues and folk music festivals. Mr. Stecher also played the fiddle on the score for the film *1,000 Pieces of Gold*.

Wendell Brooks, who is the voice of Solomon Northup and sings the songs that accompany his story, joined the Peace Corps after college and taught in Ethiopia for two years. He studied voice in Vienna and developed an interest in traditional African-American music while teaching, acting and singing in Sweden. Mr. Brooks currently teaches at Berkeley High School, is an instructor at Hayward State University and performs throughout California.

